

Another View of an Episode in “Why Bad Things Happen to Good Analysts” by Jack Davis

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The September 2016 issue of *Studies in Intelligence* (vol 60, no. 3) contained a reprint of a chapter the late CIA analyst and teacher Jack Davis had written in the book *Analyzing Intelligence: National Security Practitioners’ Perspectives* (2nd Edition) edited by Roger Z. George and James B. Bruce (Georgetown University Press, 2014). The chapter, “Why Bad Things Happen to Good Analysts,” contains an anecdote (p. 125 in the book and p. 17 of the unclassified issue of *Studies*) Jack used to illustrate the “paradox of expertise”—the argument that experts are prone, in their areas of expertise, to be blind to major changes that are evident to non-experts.

Jack attributed the anecdote to a senior CIA analyst who made a presentation in 1990 at Jack’s seminar on intelligence successes and failures. The analyst claimed that an Oval Office briefing on “why the Berlin Wall was not likely to come down any time soon” had taken place on 9 November 1989—the day the wall actually did begin to come down—and was interrupted by a staff member who urged the president to turn on the television to watch the beginning of the Wall’s demise.

I was present at the meeting the senior analyst described, but it neither took place on the 9th nor was the briefing meant solely to discuss the future of the Berlin Wall. More importantly, the analyst left out an important part of the story that runs counter to the “paradox of expertise” argument.^a

Here’s the context. I was assistant national intelligence officer (NIO) for the USSR at the time. On the morning of 8 November 1989, word came to the National Intelligence Council (NIC) and CIA that President George H. W. Bush wanted a briefing that afternoon on the tumultuous events occurring in East Europe. The briefing was to help prepare

the president for his first meeting as president with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Malta in early December. A notation of the briefing and a redacted list of participants is contained in the president’s diary for that day.^b

Director of Central Intelligence William Webster and Director of European Analysis John McLaughlin led the briefing team. During the briefing, which lasted a little more than an hour, senior analyst Brian Quigley spoke to events inside East Germany, and I briefed on the Soviet view of things. I was a CIA careerist, but I was representing the NIC. My first account as a CIA analyst was covering Soviet policy toward East Europe (1978–81). The DI’s Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA) at the last minute sent a senior manager, who had no formal role in the briefing. After reading Jack’s article in 2014 and again in preparing this letter, I rechecked my recollection of what happened that day with Brian, who added some details.

For both of us, this was the most memorable day in our careers at CIA. That’s not to say we have every detail exactly right, but these have been our recollections from the moment we walked out of the White House that day. They are not events we are trying to recall for the first time after almost three decades.

After we completed our formal briefings, the president asked two questions. The first was “What about the Wall”? Brian responded emphatically that it was “history.” He recalls that, after gasping to himself that he gave such a flip answer to the president, he explained that any wall one can go around (East Germans were escaping via Hungary) had ceased to serve its purpose. The president then asked whether, if that were the case, Gorbachev would

a. When I read his chapter, I had tried to point this out to Jack via internal e-mail, but my note apparently never reached him.

b. “The Daily Diary of President George Bush,” November 8, 1989, page 6 and Appendix C. Available at http://web2.millercenter.org/ghb/documents/presidential_papers/ghb_diary_series/1989/ghb_1989_11.pdf

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step in to prevent the Wall from coming down. The SOVA manager—a seasoned analyst of the Soviet military—answered first and said Gorbachev would not allow the Wall to fall, citing the critical importance of East Germany to Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, the many thousands of Soviet forces stationed there, and the legacy of Nazi invasion of the USSR. So, Jack’s source got this partly right: a CIA officer did tell the president that Gorbachev would not let the Wall come down.

But the story did not end there. I immediately interjected that I could not agree with that judgment. I cited Gorbachev’s record in withdrawing Soviet troops from Afghanistan the year before, allowing free elections to proceed in Poland in the summer of 1989—elections that toppled communist rule and resulted in a Solidarity-led government—and his clear and public display of disdain for East German leader Erich Honecker while in East Berlin only a month earlier (after which Honecker was removed). I said I would not be surprised at all if Gorbachev did NOT step in to prevent the Wall from coming down.

Four years ago, following my retirement from CIA, I talked with Ambassador James Dobbins, who in November 1989 was the principal deputy assistant secretary for European and Canadian Affairs. I mentioned that I had briefed the president a few times, including the day before

the Wall fell. He said he, too, had been in the Oval Office that day as one of State Department’s representatives—I had forgotten. To my surprise, he then brought up the story of the disagreement in front of the president. Although he did not recall me personally as one of the briefers, he said he remembered the disagreement because he had sided with the view that Gorbachev would allow the Wall to come down.

In sum, the president heard arguments that day from an expert on East German politics that the Wall was “history,” from an expert on Soviet foreign policy that Gorbachev would not prevent it from falling, and from an expert on the Soviet military that he would prevent it. I agree that there is such a thing as a “paradox of expertise,” but this episode could be cited as an example of the value of expertise. And even the military analyst’s argument, while off the mark on Gorbachev’s reaction, may have factored into the president’s decision to avoid triumphalism in reacting to the debacle the Soviets suffered when the wall opened and more East European communist regimes crumbled. When the wall came down the day after the briefing, the president publicly was as cool as a cucumber, perhaps because that Oval Office discussion had provided forewarning as well as a context for the implications—for both the United States and the Soviet Union—of such a momentous event.

